

7. The Political Elite and Grassroots Leaders

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The Political Elite and Grassroots Leaders

The previous chapter examined the political machine in Naga City which centered on the incorporation of the city government and sector-based resident organizations. This chapter focuses on the political elite and grassroots-level leaders. The political elite primarily consists of the elected members of the City Council (vice mayor and city councilors), while the grassroots-level leaders are the barangay officials and officers of the sector-based organizations. Their roles, socioeconomic backgrounds, recruitment, and motivations for supporting Jesse Robredo will be examined in the following sections.¹

Roles

Vice Mayor and City Councilors

The Sangguniang Panlungsod (City Council) of Naga City is composed of thirteen members, as already mentioned. Eleven of them are elected, including the vice mayor who is the ex officio presiding officer. The City Council functions as a legislative body enacting ordinances, approving resolutions, and appropriating funds. The mayor needs the support of these functions to achieve the smooth management of city government. Hence, the mayor constantly needs the support of council members in order to fulfill his programs. This means that the work of the city councilors takes place largely in the session hall of City Hall legislating the mayor's policy plans, rather than

going out and working directly with residents to gain their loyalty and support. But the scope of councilor work also includes responding to resident requests for assistance since the councilors are persons with influence in the city government whom residents feel they can turn to when they encounter problems. City councilors usually refer these requests to the responsible offices of the city government.

When Robredo won in his first election in 1988, only three of his supporters won seats on the City Council (another councilor joined Robredo's group later on). For this reason, Robredo had a hard time having his budget and other ordinances passed by the City Council. Realizing the importance of having a majority on the City Council, Robredo put a great deal of effort into getting all of his candidates elected to the council in following elections. In the 1992 election, he used the slogan "*Ubos kung Ubos, Gabos kung Gabos*" (nothing if nothing, all if all) to appeal to voters to vote for a straight ticket of Robredo candidates. This slogan reflected the Robredo's perception that controlling the City Council was important, because control over the council meant controlling its powers to legislate the budget, ordinances, and resolutions which in turn meant controlling the way resources would be distributed.

Barangay Chiefs

Barangay officials (the barangay chiefs and barangay councilors) and officers of the sector-based organizations are the grassroots leaders who work directly at gathering support among the residents.²

The barangay officials work within their respective barangay. In Naga City these vary in size with population of most of the barangay ranging from 2,000 to 7,000 people (NSO 1995a).³ As official representatives of the residents, the barangay chiefs and barangay councilors work as go-betweens connecting the city government and the residents.

Their most important work is appealing to the city government to fix problems in their respective barangay, like keeping roads and drainage in good condition or securing drinking water. By getting action on such matters, barangay officials gain the support of residents which secures their positions as barangay officials. During election periods, they work as mediators between candidates whom they support and the residents in their areas. For instance, barangay officials accompany mayoral and city council candidates for their "house to house" campaigning. Barangay officials introduce each candidate to the residents and, at the same time, tell the candidates about conditions in the barangay. Meetings in each barangay, which are commonly called "sorties," are also planned and carried out with the assistance of barangay

officials and the Lingkod Barangay Office. Another duty of barangay officials is recruiting leaders for lower-level positions.

As of 1998, twenty-six of the twenty-seven barangay chiefs supported Robredo, at least ostensibly, although the stance of a few was not so firm. When a barangay chief is not loyal to the mayor, Robredo will turn to a loyal barangay councilor in the barangay and designate him/her as a barangay coordinator.⁴ The mayor will then channel all city government projects in the barangay through this barangay coordinator and exclude the disloyal barangay chief from access to the city government. The mayor will use the barangay coordinator for election campaigning, in which case, the disloyal barangay chief loses access to the resources of the city government. This puts the chief into a difficult situation for keeping his influence in the barangay because he has no access to resources for distributing to the residents.⁵

Robredo utilizes a variety of methods to check and control the loyalty of barangay chiefs. For example, during the 1988 congressional election, he prepared a manifesto declaring support for his candidate, Jaime Jacob. He took it to the barangay chiefs and asked them to sign. Confronted with the manifesto, Robredo watched their reactions to try to detect which chiefs were firm and which were wavering.⁶ Through the constant surveillance of their loyalty and the threat of terminating access to resources, the mayor keeps firm control over the barangay chiefs.

Officers of Sector-Based Organizations

Officers of sector-based organizations are grassroots leaders whose status is based on their organizations. One side of their work is helping organization members who face problems to arrange services from the city government. Another side of their work is vote gathering during elections. Because of these duties, they are the very forefront leaders in the local power structure having direct contacts with residents.

Barangay chiefs refrain from being concurrent officers in sector-based organizations of the Lingkod Barangay Office to avoid charges of partisan political activities and to concentrate on official works of the barangay. But many barangay councilors are simultaneously chapter presidents or barangay coordinators of the *Lakas ng Kababaihan*. Five of eight barangay coordinators whom the author interviewed were also barangay councilors. It seems quite common for community leaders to hold several positions simultaneously because the number of leaders is limited. Also by having dual positions as barangay officials and officers of sectoral organizations, leaders can get involved in both formal and informal affairs which is convenient for grassroots power holders because it simplifies the work they perform for the political machine.

Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Vice Mayor and City Councilors

The vice mayor and city councilors are among the political elite at the city level. Table 7-1 shows their socioeconomic backgrounds. As indicated in the table, most of the members of the City Council belong economically to the middle class.⁷ They are mostly professionals such as lawyers, government employees, and medical doctors. Although two councilors had stepped up from the position of barangay chief, they were somewhat different from other barangay chiefs. One of them had been a student movement leader in the city, and he became a barangay chief just after graduation. After becoming a city councilor, he passed the bar examination and became a lawyer. The other councilor had been an ex officio city councilor as the president of the Liga ng mga Barangay (League of Barangays) before running for the City Council. Both had unique backgrounds and may be rather exceptional cases. In this sense, the upward mobility from leaders at the barangay level to leaders at city level seems to be quite low. There seems to be a certain class distinction between them.

Another notable point is that there is almost no direct involvement of the city's economic elite in the politics of the city, and none who occupy elective or other offices in the city government. There was one councilor who could be identified as one of the economic elite. He had been a member of Robredo's party while a councilor, but had run for vice mayor in the 1998 elections on a slate separated from Robredo's camp. He lost to Robredo's vice mayoral candidate. Members of the economic elite tend to avoid committing themselves directly to politics. If some do run as candidate, they cannot be sure of winning by merely depending on their personal wealth.⁸ Thus the political and economic elites are basically separated in Naga City.

Regarding birthplaces, eight of the city councilors migrated from outside Naga City. Of the three who were born in the city, only one councilor had both parents who were from Naga City. Moreover, no one had relatives who had been elected officials in the city. This indicates that city councilors do not rely on kinship as a political base.

Their socioeconomic backgrounds indicate that the vice mayor and city councilors do not have political resources except for their individual capabilities as professionals. Therefore they need to depend on the resources provided by the mayor. In other words, it is Robredo's machine that produces the victories for the members of his camp and which maintains his party's monopoly on the seats in the city council. The vice mayor and city councilors are

TABLE 7-1
SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS OF THE VICE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCILORS
(Eleven Elected Officials, as of 1997)

| A. Age | | B. Economic Status ^a | |
|----------------------------|-----|---------------------------------|-----|
| | No. | | No. |
| 71–80 | 1 | Rich (A&B) | 3 |
| 61–70 | 3 | Middle (C) | 7 |
| 51–60 | 4 | Poor (D&E) | 1 |
| 41–50 | 2 | | |
| 31–40 | 1 | | |
| C. Birth Place | | D. Education ^b | |
| | No. | Attainment | No. |
| Naga City | 3 | Doctorate degree | 1 |
| Outside Naga City | 8 | Law or medicine | 6 |
| | | Master's degree | 2 |
| | | College graduate | 2 |
| | | College dropout | 1 |
| E. Occupation ^c | | F. Kin in Politics | |
| | No. | | No. |
| Lawyer | 4 | In Naga City | 0 |
| Former government employee | 3 | Outside Naga City | 5 |
| Medical doctor | 2 | None | 6 |
| University professor | 1 | | |
| Business | 1 | | |
| Former barangay chief | 2 | | |

Source: The author's interviews.

^a The author uses the criteria (ABCDE classifications) of Arroyo (1990) which are based on house indicators for measuring economic status.

^b The Philippine educational system is six years of elementary school, four years of secondary school, and four years of college. There are also professional schools, such as law and medical schools that come after college. The total number added up to twelve because one councilor finished law school and also got a master's degree.

^c Some councilors belonged to several categories simultaneously.

regarded as Robredo's people not seen as independent political personalities. This is related to their recruitment, which will be discussed later.

Barangay Chiefs

Table 7-2 presents the socioeconomic backgrounds of the barangay chiefs. Most of them apparently belong to the lower-income class. Seventeen among

TABLE 7-2
SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS OF BARANGAY CHIEFS
(Total Twenty-seven, as of 1997)

| A. Age | | B. Economic Status | |
|--------------------------------|-----|-------------------------------------|-----|
| | No. | | No. |
| 61–70 | 2 | Rich (A&B) | 3 |
| 51–60 | 9 | Middle (C) | 7 |
| 41–50 | 11 | Poor (D&E) | 17 |
| 31–40 | 4 | | |
| 21–30 | 1 | | |
| C. Birth Place | | D. Education | |
| | No. | Attainment | No. |
| Naga City | 17 | Master's degree | 1 |
| Outside Naga City | 10 | College graduate | 11 |
| | | College dropout | 8 |
| | | High school graduate | 2 |
| | | Elementary school graduate | 5 |
| E. Occupation ^a | | F. Kin in Politics ^c | |
| | No. | | No. |
| Business | 11 | Have | 3 |
| Employee of private company | 4 | None | 24 |
| Agriculture | 4 | | |
| Engineer | 3 | | |
| Barangay official ^b | 3 | | |
| Government employee | 2 | | |
| Teacher | 2 | | |
| Nurse | 1 | | |
| Driver | 1 | | |
| Housewife | 1 | | |
| | | G. Experience as Barangay Councilor | |
| | | | No. |
| | | Have | 15 |
| | | None | 12 |

Source: The author's interviews.

^a Occupations held before becoming barangay chief. The total exceeds twenty-seven because some belonged to several categories. Fourteen chiefs kept their occupation even after being chief.

^b "Barangay official" indicates those who did not have any jobs aside from barangay *tanod* (guard) or barangay health worker.

^c "In politics" means being city councilors or barangay chiefs.

the twenty-seven, which was 63.0 per cent of the total, were in this category. Regarding education, more than half had not graduated from college. Occupation-wise, most of them managed their own businesses which were small scale. These facts indicate that most of the barangay chiefs have almost the

same socioeconomic status as the majority of the residents in the city. Barangay chiefs belonging to the lower-income class do not necessarily head barangays where a lot of urban poor reside. Some are chiefs of barangays where middle-income subdivisions are located. In other words, the middle-income and high-income classes do not pay much attention to barangay politics. Thus it is apparent that personal wealth is not important for being barangay chief.

More than a few barangay chiefs were from outside Naga City. Moreover, most of them did not have relatives who were or had been elected officials. This indicates that the position of barangay chief is not determined by kinship in a dynastic pattern. This may be due to the urban circumstances of Naga City where population mobility is high. The situation may be different in rural areas.

However, there is certainly one significant factor important for securing the position of barangay chief and this is an aspirant's relationship with the city government which determines how many resources he can mobilize and deliver to his barangay. A chief's personal character does matter, but material interests are decisive. This becomes apparent during barangay elections. As these approach, people aspiring to the position of barangay chief start to make frequent visits to City Hall to woo the mayor and get his endorsement. The mayor's endorsement is crucial since it will decide their access to city government resources. Most barangay chiefs have had experience working as barangay councilors before becoming chiefs. Through such experience, they have acquired the know-how to work as mediators between the city government and the residents.

Officers of Sector-Based Organizations

Table 7-3 shows the socioeconomic backgrounds of sixteen officers of sector-based organizations in a certain barangay whom the author selected as samples.⁹ Most of them were from the low-income class (twelve of the sixteen, 75.0 per cent), and they were largely from the same economic class and educational background as the barangay chiefs. Twelve of the sixteen (75.0 per cent) did not finish college, and nine (56.3 per cent) were from outside Naga City. This indicates that personal wealth and kinship are not decisive factors for holding leadership positions in sector-based organizations.

However, occupation is a notable feature that differentiates officers of sectoral organizations from barangay chiefs. Housewife is the dominant occupation among the organization officers. It is quite natural because half of the interviewees were officers of the *Lakas ng Kababaihan*, which is a women's organization. Nevertheless, it is important to note that women play a crucial role in gaining supporters at the grassroots level, and the *Lakas ng Kababaihan*

TABLE 7-3
SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS OF OFFICERS IN SECTOR-BASED ORGANIZATIONS
(Total Sixteen, as of 1997)

| A. Age | | B. Economic Status | |
|----------------------------------|-----|----------------------------------------|-----|
| | No. | | No. |
| 61–70 | 4 | Rich (A&B) | 0 |
| 51–60 | 3 | Middle (C) | 4 |
| 41–50 | 5 | Poor (D&E) | 12 |
| 31–40 | 3 | | |
| 21–30 | 1 | | |
| C. Birth Place | | D. Education | |
| | No. | Attainment | No. |
| Naga City | 7 | College graduate | 4 |
| Outside Naga City | 9 | College dropout | 2 |
| | | Vocational school | 1 |
| | | High school graduate | 8 |
| | | Elementary school graduate | 1 |
| E. Occupation | | F. Experience as Barangay Official | |
| | No. | Position in Barangay | No. |
| Housewife | 6 | Barangay councilor | 1 |
| Employee of private company | 2 | Barangay health worker | 3 |
| Business | 2 | Barangay <i>tanod</i> (guard) | 1 |
| Government employee | 1 | A family member is a barangay official | 4 |
| Midwife | 1 | None | 7 |
| Employee of small-scale business | 1 | | |
| Technician | 1 | | |
| Student | 1 | | |
| Unemployed | 1 | | |

Source: The author's interviews.

is a powerful vote-gathering organization. Officers of the Lingkod Barangay Office and the Lakas ng Kababaihan explain the prominence of women by saying that housewives can spare more time for organization activities, like visiting the City Hall frequently, participating in programs organized by the city government, or having more free time to spend among residents to find out how the situation is. Available time for activities, firm roots in the community, and close communications with the city government make women efficient grassroots-level leaders.

Recruitment and Motivation

Vice Mayor and City Councilors

Elections for vice mayor and city councilors are held together with the mayoral election. The selection process for the elections is in fact the recruitment process for members of the City Council.

The process starts as aspirants for the City Council approach Robredo and ask him to include them on his slate. Robredo usually organizes a screening committee composed of his close aides. This committee makes a short list of candidates, the primary criterion for selection being person's ability to win, which in effect means popularity. To discern this, the committee gathers opinions from barangay officials, officers of the sector-based organizations, and city government employees. After going through this process, Robredo himself makes the final decision who should be included on his slate. By retaining the authority to make the final decision, Robredo can exercise strong influence over candidates. As mentioned earlier, candidates have to rely on Robredo's strong political machine. In this sense, there is no coalition between Robredo and the other candidates as equal partners. Robredo also pays attention to keeping a certain balance of sectors when selecting candidates. He tries to pick representative candidates from each sector like education, business, the urban poor, etc. In addition, national-level politicians sometimes intervene in the selection process and some candidates are put onto the slate because of their pressure.

Robredo makes such prudent preparations in order to win at least a majority and maintain a strong influence over city council members. Keeping his dominance over the City Council is crucial for realizing his policies.

As to why they support the Robredo administration, the vice mayor and city councilors pointed to his good management of the city government. As examples they point to the reduction of corruption he has brought about, to the city's sound financial situation, and to the effective projects he has implemented. Being of middle-class background, their answers are quite typical of this class. Such answers may explain their stances, but they are not enough to explain fully their motivations to join Robredo's party. Undeniably they see greater chances of winning by being included in Robredo's line-up, simply because they can access Robredo's political resources from his city government and his organizations. The vice mayor and city councilors, who mostly belong to the middle class, have no personal resources to carry on their own

campaigns. Therefore, they have to depend on Robredo. Robredo's influence over the City Council arises from this great dependence.

Barangay Chiefs and Officers of Sector-Based Organizations

There are various patterns for recruiting barangay chiefs and officers of sector-based organizations. There are roughly three types of grassroots leaders. The first is the leaders inherited from Robredo's predecessor, del Castillo, and those who continued to support Robredo even after the rift with Villafuerte. The second is the leaders who used to work for Robredo's opponents but shifted to Robredo's side. The third type is the leaders who have been with Robredo from the beginning, and started to work as grassroots leaders after he assumed the mayorship.

As of 1997 only one of the twenty-seven barangay chiefs had been inherited from the previous administration; eight had worked for Robredo's opponents but shifted to Robredo's camp; and seventeen barangay chiefs had supported Robredo since they started working as grassroots leaders. The one remaining chief was taking a neutral stance. The reason for so little carry-over of barangay chiefs from the del Castillo government is neither that these chiefs did not care to support Robredo nor that they could not survive the barangay elections. Most of them were already old and they chose to retire.

As for the officers of sector-based organizations, some did not provide clear answers about when they started working as leaders, but at least two of the sixteen officers interviewed had worked for del Castillo and later became leaders under Robredo. Most of the others were Robredo's leaders from the start, and were rather new as grassroots leaders.

Given that barangay officials are chosen by election, Robredo has no legal prerogatives to appoint his favored grassroots leaders directly to such positions. So the actual relations between Robredo and barangay officials, especially chiefs, are generally formed after they are elected as barangay officials. Of course, there are cases where Robredo's loyal leaders have been elected as barangay officials; and in the 1997 elections almost all the candidates for barangay chief sought Robredo's endorsement, but he took a neutral stance and did not endorse any candidates. However, even without Robredo's endorsement, candidates expressed their supports for his administration. Therefore, the elections become races among Robredo supporters, and after the elections, the mayor solidifies relations with the elected barangay officials and takes up projects and vote gathering in the barangays.

Unlike the barangay officials, the officers of the sector-based organizations are selected by Robredo, and relations between the mayor and these officers are relatively stable. The Lingkod Barangay Office directly appoints espe-

cially the barangay coordinators of the *Lakas ng Kababaihan*. The officers of the Barangay People's Foundation have been loyal poll watchers for Robredo for years. Moreover, the sector-based organizations keep loyal leaders as their officers through internal elections which are de facto reshuffle of leadership initiated by the city government. These organizations usually hold elections for their officers at least six months before local elections. Through this internal electoral process, grassroots leaders of insufficient loyalty are expelled from the organizations and loyal leaders are virtually appointed by the *Lingkod Barangay Office* to replace them. This process strengthens the loyalty of the organizations to Robredo in preparation for elections.

Considering that Robredo's administration started in 1988, his relations with grassroots leaders have not yet been long term. The start of their relations with Robredo was initiated through recommendations from either Robredo's predecessor or from higher-level leaders. When discussing their reasons to supporting Robredo, they do not point to kinship, ritual kinship, or other personal socioeconomic relations. Instead most of them mentioned two phrases: "*Maganda ang pamamalakad*" (he runs the government well) and "*Madali siyang lapitan*" (he is approachable). These phrases are rather fixed "formal" expressions to praise government officials in general. But if one digs further behind these words as this author did with further interviews, it becomes apparent that these words implied the Robredo government's practical deeds of providing services for the indigent, fixing infrastructure, and supplying other concrete benefits to the residents. This implication becomes clearer when most of the grassroots leaders identified indigence as the most serious problem in their areas. Robredo runs the government well in the sense that he attends to problems well, and he is approachable in the sense that residents have relatively easier access to the resources he controls.

Of course, these two phrases can be interpreted more widely to include integrity of leadership or dignity of residents. These aspects also definitely play a role. The moral and the material should be discussed together for a full explanation of Robredo's power. The deed of running a government well has a dual effect: it increases material benefits and elevates moral values. But it also has to be remembered that Robredo keeps a check on the loyalty of his grassroots leaders and controls the distribution of benefits to keep their loyalty. Without practical methods for controlling benefits, power cannot be maintained.

The discussion in this chapter indicates that both the political elite (vice mayor and city councilors) and grassroots leaders (barangay officials and officers of the sector-based organizations) need access to resources controlled by mayor in order to maintain their positions. This can be described as a

unitary power mechanism headed by Robredo. The political elite and grassroots leaders are controlled by rewards and sanctions within this power mechanism.¹⁰ At the same time, the mayor's good performance functions in two ways to strengthen their loyalty. It appeals to their moral values and also increases the availability of resources.

Notes

- 1 The author interviewed all members of the City Council, all barangay chiefs, and twenty-eight officers of the sector-based organizations. These officers included barangay coordinators, chapter presidents, and federation officers of the *Lakas ng Kababaihan* and the *Barangay People's Foundation*. The information in this chapter is based on the interviews.
- 2 The smallest administrative unit in the Philippines is the barangay which is managed by a *punong barangay* (barangay chief), seven *Sangguniang Barangay* members (barangay councilors), a *Sangguniang Kabataan* chairman (Youth Council chairman), a barangay secretary, and a barangay treasurer. The *Sangguniang Barangay* is composed of these officers except for the barangay secretary and barangay treasurer. The barangay chief and barangay councilors are elected through barangay elections.
- 3 As of 1995, *Barangay Concepcion Pequeña* was the biggest of Naga City's twenty-seven barangays in terms of population with 15,615 residents; the smallest was *Barangay Dinaga* with 714 residents. Also see Table 2-1.
- 4 This barangay coordinator is different from a barangay coordinator in the *Lakas ng Kababaihan*, although the same title is applied.
- 5 The virtual replacement of a barangay chief through the appointment of a barangay coordinator is not a Robredo invention. This tactic has been utilized by previous administrations in the city.
- 6 This story appeared in a local daily newspaper. See "Manifesto Unequivocally Supporting the Congressional Bid of Jaime S. Jacob," *Bikol Daily*, March 10, 1998.
- 7 There are several measurements for economic status, but this study uses the ABCDE classifications based on the quality of a person's house because this system is commonly used in surveys conducted in the Philippines. The following are criteria for house classifications: AB—made of heavy, high-quality materials, usually very well maintained, not in need of repair, well painted, sprawling lawn or garden, expensive furnishings, located in an exclusive subdivision, house stands out if in a mixed neighborhood; C—made of mixed heavy and light materials, well maintained, may or may not have a lawn or yard, adequate furnishings, usually found in mixed neighborhood or middle-class subdivision; D—made of light, cheap materials, generally shabby appearance, no lawn or yard, scanty

furnishings, crowded or shabby neighborhood; E—small, dilapidated, temporary makeshift structure, usually a *barong-barong* (shanty), cramped space, bare furnishings, located in slum districts (Arroyo 1990, p. 3).

- 8 In addition to the person who ran for vice mayor, two other candidates identified within the economic elite ran for the City Council in the 1998 elections on slates opposed to Robredo. However, neither of them were elected.
- 9 The sixteen officers in Table 7-3 resided in a barangay located at the center of Naga City. Its population was around 5,000 as of 1995. The sixteen interviewees consisted of one barangay coordinator of the Lakas ng Kababaihan, seven chapter presidents of the Lakas ng Kababaihan (one of them was simultaneously a chapter president of the Barangay People's Foundation, and another was a chapter officer of the foundation), and eight officers of a chapter of the Barangay People's Foundation.
- 10 Benson (1973, pp. 562–63) says that the *liders* themselves control votes, and voter loyalty is not expressed toward politicians but toward the *liders* themselves. However, the example of Naga City shows that the *liders* are merely intermediaries between the politicians and voters. It seems that a difference of definition causes the difference in perspective, since Benson regards municipal mayors and municipal councilors as *liders*.